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# Taming Augustine's Monstrosity: Aquinas's Notion of Use in the Struggle for Moral Growth

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# Taming Augustine's Monstrosity: Aquinas's Notion of Use in the Struggle for Moral Growth

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**Abstract:** *in Book VIII of his Confessions, Saint Augustine offers a detailed description of one of the most famous cases of weakness of will in the history of philosophy. Augustine characterizes his experience as a monstrous situation in which he both wills and does not will moral growth, but he is at odds to explain this phenomenon. In this paper, I argue that Aquinas's action theory offers important resources for explaining Augustine's monstrosity. On Aquinas's schema, human acts are composed of various operations of intellect and will, and thus are subject to disintegration. In order to capture the gap in human action between making choices to pursue particular goals and translating those choices into behavior, Aquinas distinguishes between two operations of will that he calls choice and use. I apply his distinction between choice and use to Augustine's case, arguing that Augustine's moral weakness is a result of will's failure to use its choices. The central thesis of this paper is that Augustine's monstrosity is a bona fide case of weakness of will that is best explained as a failure in use at the level of will.*

## **I. Augustine's Monstrosity**

In Book VIII of his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine offers a detailed description of one of the most famous cases of weakness of will in the history of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> He recounts how he had spent his youth rejecting the Catholic faith of his mother, and indulging in the pleasures of the body, especially sexual pleasures. Yet he reaches a

point in life when he ardently desires to be morally upright and to return to Christianity. However, in virtue of the bad habits he had developed throughout his youth, he found it exceedingly difficult to change, even though he now believed with certainty the truths of Christianity, and even though he felt an extremely strong desire to live in accordance with the moral ideals he now so fervently held.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone reading this compelling account cannot help but feel the genuine sense of mental torture and frustration Augustine experiences. He describes the experience as "madness,"<sup>3</sup> an "agony of hesitation,"<sup>4</sup> a "monstrous situation,"<sup>5</sup> a "morbid condition," in which the mind commands itself to will and fails to obey its own command.<sup>6</sup> Speaking to his friend Alypius about the situation, he exclaims: "What is wrong with us? ... Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven ... and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood."<sup>7</sup> Augustine's frustration stems not only from being unable to act in accordance with his best judgments and most fervent desires, but also from his inability to provide an adequate explanation of the experience. "What causes this monstrosity and why does this happen?" he exclaims.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine's experience of weakness of will indicates one very common way that human actions can fail or fall apart. His account is so compelling, in part, because his experience of weakness of will is so familiar, at least to those who take morality seriously. For many people, moral growth is an important goal, but it is also an arduous struggle, requiring that we alter well-established patterns of behavior and bad habits in order to live more consistently in accord with our moral ideals. The struggle is so maddening because despite knowing what we ought to do, and despite making genuine choices to do it, like Augustine, we are often weak, and at the moment of action, we often fail to translate those choices into behavior.

In this paper, I argue that Aquinas's action theory, and, in particular, his conceptual distinction between choice and use, is crucial in explaining cases of weakness of will such as Augustine's monstrosity. On Aquinas's schema, human acts are composed of various operations of intellect and will, and thus are subject to disintegration. In order to capture the gap in human action between making choices to pursue particular goals and translating those choices into behavior, Aquinas distinguishes between two operations of will that he calls choice and use. I apply this distinction between choice

and use to Augustine's case, arguing that Augustine's moral weakness is a result of will's failure to use its choices. Augustine characterizes his experience of weakness as a case in which he both wills and does not will moral growth, but he is at odds to explain this phenomenon. The central thesis of this paper is that Augustine's monstrosity is a bona fide case of weakness of will that is best explained as a failure in use at the level of will.<sup>9</sup>

The structure of the paper is as follows: in order to frame my arguments, I begin with a brief discussion of contemporary distinctions between recklessness, compulsion, and weakness. In the second section, I discuss Aquinas's action theory, paying special attention to his distinction between choice and use. In the third section, I then apply Aquinas's distinction between choice and use to explain Augustine's monstrosity. I conclude with some very general remarks about the usefulness and application of this approach in contemporary discussions of moral agency.

## **II. Recklessness, Weakness, and Compulsion**

Every evening after dinner, Rachel fixes herself a big bowl of ice cream. She is overweight, has recently had a knee replacement, and has been told by her doctor that she must lose weight. She knows eating ice cream every night is bad for her, and she really wants to lose weight and take some pressure off those knees, but every night she eats the ice cream anyway. There are at least three possible explanations of this fairly common experience, each of which issues a very different moral assessment of the situation: Rachel is either reckless, compelled, or weak-willed.<sup>10</sup>

Rachel is reckless if her failure to act is a result of culpable ignorance, of either failing to know relevant information that is readily available to her, (e.g., that ice cream is high in fat, that a diet high in fat can lead to being overweight, that being overweight is unhealthy and strains the knee joints, etc.), or failing to consider what she knows. The reckless agent makes a poor judgment about how to act, in this case to eat the ice cream, that she would not have made if she had only paid adequate attention to the reasons available to her. Thus she makes a culpable error in reasoning.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, compulsion occurs when an agent makes the correct judgment about how to act but cannot act on her judgment because she is not in control of her behavior. Compulsion refers to

internal physiological or psychological constraints that make certain of the agent's desires irresistible, or quite literally out of her control. The most common cases of compulsion are cases of addiction, where, for example, an agent no longer has the capacity to resist one more cigarette or one more hit of heroin. So Rachel is compelled only if her desire for ice cream is literally irresistible. The compelled agent may be culpable in some instances for initial reckless behavior that led to the addiction that now compels.<sup>12</sup> Yet even if she is responsible for developing the habit, once addiction takes hold the agent no longer has the capacity to resist the relevant desires. She cannot control her actions despite her better judgment.

A third possible explanation of Rachel's failure every night to resist eating ice cream is weakness of will. A weak-willed action is an action that an agent performs against her better judgment. Unlike the reckless agent, the weak agent judges correctly about how she ought to act, and so does not make an error in reasoning. Unlike the compelled agent, the weak agent has the capacity for self-control to act on her better judgments. The weak-willed agent fails to act in accordance with her better judgment not because her desires are irresistible, but because she is weak and gives into temptation. She makes the correct judgment, and she has the capacity for self-control, but this capacity is weak and unstable, and so she often fails to exercise it.

Weakness of will is supposed to pick out those cases in between recklessness and compulsion in which an agent makes a culpable error in willing. Yet there is a long philosophical tradition of skepticism about whether weakness of will, so described, is even possible, which has given rise to two competing lines of thought.<sup>13</sup> Some philosophers take a Socratic line, arguing that it is not possible for an agent to act intentionally against her better judgment, such that weakness of will is really just a species of recklessness.<sup>14</sup> Weakness of will is not a failure of will at all but a failure in reasoning, typically characterized by an error in evaluating, or ranking, particular goods, in which an agent judges to be best at this moment what she usually judges, or would otherwise judge, to be worse had she considered reasons available to her.<sup>15</sup> Others contend that weakness of will collapses into compulsion.<sup>16</sup> On this line of thought, the weak may very well make a clear-headed and correct judgment about how they ought to act. They

fail to go through with it because their desires to do otherwise are irresistible, and thus compulsive.

Skeptics contend that what we call a weak-willed action must either be a case of an agent making skewed judgments at a particular moment about what's good for her, and thus being reckless, or of an agent not genuinely authorizing her behavior, and thus being compelled. Yet defenders of weakness of will note that eliminating this third possibility makes it difficult to explain the very common experience of the struggle to break bad habits or to become a morally better person.<sup>17</sup> If weakness of will collapses into recklessness, then agents who claim to be acting contrary to their best judgments are culpable but disingenuous, i.e., "they do not *really* judge as best what they claim to judge as best."<sup>18</sup> Yet if weakness of will collapses into compulsion, then people are sincere in their proclamations about knowing what they ought to do, but they aren't free to do it, and so aren't culpable for failing to act.

The worry is that by eliminating weakness of will as a viable category of human experience, we do away with any meaningful notion of self-control. Most of us striving to develop better eating habits are not compelled to eat ice cream in the same way a heroin addict is compelled to take another hit. Nor do we always fail to act because of an error in judgment. Standing at the freezer door, I may not need any further information, and I may well be judging that I really ought not eat the ice cream. I may be considering fully all the relevant information, and I may have the capacity to exercise control over my desire for the ice cream, but I am weak and so fail in many instances to do so.

The debate over the possibility of weakness of will is extremely nuanced and complex, and it is not my aim in this paper either to explore these nuances further or to offer a philosophically rigorous defense of weakness of will. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that weakness of will is possible, which seems a reasonable assumption given that it has the support of both ordinary experience and philosophical argument. I use these distinctions among recklessness, weakness, and compulsion to frame the rest of the discussion, beginning with Aquinas's views about the nature and source of human action.

### **III. Aquinas's Action Theory**

For Aquinas, human action is a process characterized by means-end reasoning, whereby an agent identifies an end, some object or state of affairs that she apprehends as good for her, deliberates about possible means for realizing that end, and then engages in the behavior that she decides is likely to secure that end.<sup>19</sup> The powers of intellect and will are what enable an agent to perform an intentional action. Aquinas understands intellect and will, not as wholly autonomous, discreet faculties that act independently of one another, but rather as powers an agent has that in various ways depend on one another, and work together to enable an agent to perform an intentional action.<sup>20</sup> Intellect is a cognitive power that apprehends particular objects and actions as good, and thus provides the information required for action. Will is an appetite for the good that provides the motivation or impetus for action.

Aquinas takes great pains to differentiate the particular operations of intellect and will that together make possible a complete human action, in a way that enables us to explain a range of human behavior. What we see at the macroscopic level is an agent setting her sights on some desired object, or state of affairs, that she aims to pursue, deliberating about, and then deciding how to pursue it, and then pursuing it. Aquinas provides a very fine-grained account of what happens at the microscopic level by delineating the specific operations of intellect and will required to facilitate this process. In what follows, I first sketch briefly Aquinas's views about the nature of intellect and will and their relationship to one another. I then turn to consider in greater detail the specific operations of intellect and will that compose a complete human action, paying special attention to choice and use.

As an appetitive power, will is an inclination for the good in general. Will is a kind of hunger, craving, or bent for goodness, though not for any particular good.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, on Aquinas's schema, will cannot make its own determinations about the goodness of particular objects.<sup>22</sup> This is the job of intellect. Intellect is a cognitive power that apprehends particular objects as good, and then presents these objects to will. Once intellect presents something to will as good, then will wills it, since will just is an appetite for the good.<sup>23</sup> Yet the relationship between intellect and will is more nuanced than it may first appear. Will is not merely intellect's pawn, following wherever

intellect leads, but rather the two depend on and move one another, though in very different ways.

Aquinas distinguishes between two ways any power of the soul can move: first, "as to the exercise or use of the act," and second, "as to the determination of the act."<sup>24</sup> X moves Y to the exercise of its act when X prompts or incites Y to act rather than not act (i.e., to "do its thing," so to speak). X moves Y to the determination of its act when X directs Y to do this or that particular action. Aquinas gives the example of sight to illustrate the difference. The power of sight "sometimes sees actually and sometimes sees not; and sometimes it sees white, and sometimes black."<sup>25</sup> The distinction here is between (a) acting rather than not acting (e.g., seeing as opposed to not seeing), and (b) doing something in particular (e.g., seeing white at this moment and black at another moment). This distinction is crucial for explaining the relationship between intellect and will.

Will is responsible for moving all the powers of the soul (except the nutritive powers) in the first way, namely to the exercise of their respective operations.<sup>26</sup> Since each power of the soul is naturally directed toward some good that is proper to it (e.g., "sight is directed to the perception of color, and the intellect to the knowledge of truth"), and since will is an inclination or craving for goodness, then will moves the powers of the soul by prompting them to act.<sup>27</sup> Will moves intellect, then, as an efficient cause by turning it on, or inciting it to think.<sup>28</sup> As Aquinas puts it: "I think because I want to."<sup>29</sup> Yet since will cannot make determinations about the goodness of particular objects, will is not capable of directing action. That is, will is not capable of providing direction about what, in particular, to do. This is intellect's job. Intellect moves will in the second way, by providing direction about the particular object or ends toward which will inclines.<sup>30</sup>

Though will depends on intellect for its object, and though will wills whatever intellect presents to it as good, Aquinas contends that intellect does not coerce will to incline toward any particular good.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, there are at least two ways in which will can indirectly influence intellect's apprehension of a particular object as good or not good. The reason for this is that in most cases what we apprehend as good is not so convincing as to leave no room for dissent. As Aquinas notes: "Something apprehended to be good and appropriate in any and every circumstance that could be thought of would, to be sure,

compel us to will it."<sup>32</sup> However, most objects are not apprehended as good from every point of view, but as good under one description and repellent under another description, such as "when what is good for health is not good for pleasure."<sup>33</sup> Thus, will can indirectly influence the direction of our thought by distracting intellect from thinking about one thing in order to consider something else.<sup>34</sup> For example, Rachel may be single-minded about not eating ice cream in order to lose weight until she sees a commercial for Breyer's Rich and Creamy, which directs her to think of the pleasure ice cream brings, rather than the health risks eating too much of it imposes. Moreover, since will is responsible for turning intellect on, will can also direct intellect to stop thinking altogether. If intellect is not thinking, then it is not supplying will with any object to will. In this way will can indirectly turn itself off.

The picture that emerges from this brief sketch is one of interdependence between intellect and will. Will and intellect move each other and work together to enable an agent to perform an intentional action. Intellect provides the specific content or information required to pursue a particular course of action, and will provides the motivation or impetus required for action. We can see this more clearly by considering Aquinas's distinctions among the specific operations of intellect and will that compose a complete human action, including, though not limited to: intention, counsel, choice, the act of command, and use. Perhaps the best way to do so is to return to Rachel and the ice cream.

Rachel knows that she needs to lose weight, and she has wanted to do so for a long time. Her desire to do so, however, has never been more than a fleeting wish—until now. Motivated by the severity of her knee surgery, Rachel decides that she will change her ways, and she begins thinking seriously about how she might meet her goal to lose fifty pounds. On Aquinas's schema, Rachel has apprehended that losing weight is good for her and has now formed an intention to lose weight, which has prompted her to deliberate about specific courses of action she might take to achieve this goal. To intend a particular end involves more than simply wanting that end. Aquinas uses the example of health to illustrate the difference between wanting and intending. He states: "For when we speak of intending to have health, we mean not only that we will to have it, but that we will to reach it by means of something else."<sup>35</sup> Seeing that health is good, I may desire to have it, but I don't yet intend to be healthy until I desire

to secure good health in a way that prompts further reflection about how I might do so.

Intention then is an act of will that presupposes an act of intellect.<sup>36</sup> In intention, intellect has presented a particular end to will, in this case losing fifty pounds, prompting will to hunger for that end in a way that, in turn, nudges intellect to inquire into specific ways the agent might attain that end, in this case, specific ways by which Rachel might actually lose fifty pounds. In forming a genuine intention, Rachel now wills to reach the end through some means, though she has not yet chosen a particular means. So Rachel begins to consider some options: she could start exercising by walking for an hour every morning; she could eat nothing but green beans; she could avoid the frozen food aisle when at the store and not buy the ice cream (if its not in the house, she won't eat it); or Rachel could make no changes at all in her behavior. In an act of intellect that Aquinas calls counsel, intellect deliberates about these and other possibilities and settles on what is to be done.<sup>37</sup>

Let's say Rachel fixes on starting small by walking past the frozen food aisle next time she's at the grocery store. At the microscopic level, intellect has judged "walking past the frozen food aisle" as the way to secure the end. Intellect then presents to will "walking past the frozen food aisle" as what is to be done, which prompts a further act of will that Aquinas calls choice. In choice, will elects the particular course of action intellect has presented as the means, which in this case is "walking past the frozen food aisle."<sup>38</sup> Choice is substantially an act of will, though like intention, choice also involves intellect.<sup>39</sup> Choice results from intellect providing information about *precisely* what is to be done and will beginning to provide the impetus for doing it by indicating "yes, this is what should be done." Intention and choice are distinguished, then, because in forming an intention the agent wills the end through some means generally, whereas in making a choice the agent wills the end through a particular means.<sup>40</sup>

Choice indicates a much greater level of commitment than intention does on the part of the agent toward attaining the desired end, for once an agent has chosen, she is at the brink of action. Once a bona fide choice has been made (e.g., once Rachel has chosen to walk past the frozen food aisle), all that remains is to do it. Thus far intellect and will have worked together to determine what must be

done, and have psychologically positioned the agent for action. There is nothing left to do but act. And yet Aquinas's keen insight is that the act does not simply flow from choice but requires further work on the part of intellect and will. On Aquinas's schema, once will has chosen, intellect must then command the executive power(s) to act.<sup>41</sup> An executive power is whatever body part or other faculty the agent must use in order to execute the desired action.<sup>42</sup> For example, the executive powers that perform the act of walking past the frozen food aisle are Rachel's legs. So will's choosing then prompts intellect to issue an order, "walk past the frozen food aisle," which in turn prompts will to obey intellect's command in an operation Aquinas calls use.<sup>43</sup> In use, will obeys intellect's command by triggering the executive powers, in this case Rachel's legs, to strive toward possessing the end in reality, thereby enabling the agent to perform the behavior she thinks will secure the end.

Like choice, use involves both intellect and will. Use presupposes that through the act of command, intellect directs will to use the limbs of the body in order to implement the chosen means. However, Aquinas defines use as substantially an act of will that "signifies the application of a thing to an operation; and hence the operation to which we apply a thing is called its use."<sup>44</sup> His examples are that we use a horse to ride or a stick to strike, and we apply the term 'use' to the riding and the striking. To use an object is to be in the process of doing something with that object.<sup>45</sup> For example, I am using a stick when I am beating the stick against an old rug in order to shake the dust out. Similarly, will uses the limbs of the body, in this case Rachel's legs, when Rachel is actually implementing intellect's command to act by moving her legs so as to walk past the frozen food aisle.

Aquinas individuates choice and use by pointing to two distinct relations between will and the thing willed, where the thing willed is the composite end-through-(a particular) means. In this case, the thing willed is "losing fifty pounds by walking past the frozen food aisle when at the store."<sup>46</sup> In the first relation, the agent becomes prepared or positioned to pursue the end-through-means, and in the second relation, the agent actually strives to pursue the end-through-means.<sup>47</sup> The first relation occurs in choice where, by choosing a determinate means, will wills the means in such a way as to prepare the agent to execute the act and pursue the end. Intellect has settled on precisely

what is to be done in order to secure the end, and will wills to take this particular course of action. So, once will chooses "walk past the frozen food aisle," Rachel is ready to act. Yet for Aquinas, choice is insufficient to propel the agent into action even after intellect commands the act; action requires a further act of will. Thus, the second relation of will to the end-through-means occurs in use, whereby will triggers the relevant body parts into motion and sustains them in motion as the agent strives to pursue the end. So after will chooses "walk past the frozen food aisle," and after intellect issues the order for the legs to move in the appropriate way, will must trigger and sustain the requisite movement of the legs in order to enable Rachel to successfully avoid the frozen food aisle. In choice, the agent is poised to pursue the end-through-means and is at the brink of action. In use, the agent begins to perform the action by employing the chosen means and continues to do so until the end is possessed.

Let's say that Rachel makes a genuine choice to walk past the frozen food aisle when next at the grocery store, and yet when the opportunity arises she is weak and caves, heading straight for the Klondike Bars. Aquinas would say that if Rachel has indeed made a bona fide choice but fails to use her choice, this failure in use indicates a failure on the part of intellect to command the act wholeheartedly.<sup>48</sup> It is of course possible for use to fail as a result of some external impediment interfering with the movement of the limbs of the body. Yet, when it appears that use is failing at the level of will, that is, when it appears that will is failing to will something that intellect is commanding it to will, this is because intellect "is moved by opposite motives to command or not to command; with the result that it fluctuates between the two," and thus commands imperfectly.<sup>49</sup> As Eleonore Stump puts it, in such cases intellect is "being moved by opposed desires to represent the thing in question as both good (under one description) and not good (under a different description), so that the *intellect is double-minded*."<sup>50</sup> Since will depends on intellect to direct it to the ends toward which it inclines, if intellect is divided or double-minded about the objects it presents to will (in this case about whether to command the act), then will is likewise divided about what to will. So for Aquinas, if Rachel has made a bona fide choice, and, barring any external impediments to action, she fails to use her choice, the fault rests ultimately with intellect. Will can fail to use its choices,

but only to the extent that intellect falters in issuing the command for will to do so.

It is true that will can play a role in weakening or dividing intellect by, for example, directing intellect to think about the pleasure ice cream brings rather than the health risks eating too much of it imposes. Perhaps as Rachel approaches the frozen food section of the store she sees a display advertising ice cream on sale, which prompts her to think about how tasty those Klondike bars really are. Yet, since will can never make its own determinations about the goodness of particular objects or actions (and thus cannot determine on its own which objects or actions to pursue), any instance of will distracting intellect presupposes that intellect has presented such an action on the part of the will to will as good. Indeed, on Aquinas's schema, the remedy for this kind of failure is for intellect to become strong enough to issue a perfect command to act, for "when the mind commands itself perfectly to will, then already it wills."<sup>51</sup> Thus, Aquinas is likely to explain Rachel's so-called weakness of will as ultimately a species of recklessness, namely as a failure of intellect at the requisite time, to issue a unified and single command to will about what to will.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, Augustine's description of his struggle to live in accord with his moral ideals suggests a compelling case against this line of reasoning. Augustine is explicit that his failure is not a failure of intellect but of will. Indeed, as we shall see, he writes of the experience in terms of a unified intellect and a divided will. He believes with absolute certainty the truths of Christianity, he knows precisely what he must do in order to live a morally upright life, and his mind is commanding, wholeheartedly, that he do it. In Augustine's case, intellect presents to will a unified and strong command to act, a command that will repeatedly fails to obey. This is what makes the experience so monstrous. Augustine contends that he fails to act because his will is divided, half-hearted, partially engaged and thus weak, but that this weakness of will is not due to any weakness on the part of intellect. Indeed, Augustine's experience suggests that will can be shaped by preferences formed from prior bad habits so as to fail to follow where intellect leads, even when intellect leads wholeheartedly. Yet, Augustine is at odds to explain how this happens.

In the following section, I argue that Augustine's struggle to live a morally upright life is best explained as a bona fide case of weakness of will (as opposed to either recklessness or compulsion), that is best

characterized as a failure in use at the level of will. My use of Aquinas's notion of use departs from Aquinas's own views about the nature of intellect and will, and their relationship to one another in facilitating a human action. It is doubtful that Aquinas would grant will the kind of autonomy that my argument presupposes, and it is, therefore, unlikely that he would apply his schema for human action in the way I propose. Nonetheless, when applied in the alternative way I suggest, Aquinas's fine-grained conceptual distinctions between choice and use enable us to make sense of Augustine's claim that even though intellect is fully engaged, will is only partially engaged, both willing and not willing the desired end.

#### **IV. Taming Augustine's Monstrosity: Use as applied to Augustine**

At the opening of Book VIII, Augustine is explicit that his struggle to return to the Catholic faith of his mother, and to live in accordance with the moral ideals he now so ardently held dear, is no longer an intellectual struggle. He states: "All doubt had been taken from me...My desire was not to be more certain of you but to be more stable in you."<sup>53</sup> A bit further on he notes, "I no longer had my usual excuse to explain why I did not yet despise the world and serve you, namely, that my perception of the truth was uncertain. By now I was indeed quite sure about it."<sup>54</sup> Augustine's failure to act is not a case of recklessness in which intellect is double-minded or divided, presenting a mixed message to will about what goods to will. Rather, for Augustine the failure is a failure of will that produces a "morbid condition of the mind which, when it is lifted up by the truth, does not unreservedly rise to it."<sup>55</sup>

Yet, one might plausibly argue that Augustine's experience is more akin to compulsion than to weakness. Indeed, Augustine often uses language and imagery that suggest he was not in control of his behavior. Describing his struggle to convert he states: "I was sure it was better for me to render myself up to your love than to surrender to my own cupidity. But while the former course was pleasant to think about and had my notional assent, the latter was more pleasant and *overcame me*."<sup>56</sup> He explains his condition: "I was...bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice...." and that by "servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity."<sup>57</sup> Admittedly, the description of

habits to which there is no resistance becoming necessity, desires that overcome, and the imagery of being bound by iron, suggest that at this point Augustine is enslaved by concupiscence such that he does not have the capacity to resist these desires. Yet in my view, the real frustration for Augustine, the reason why this is such a monstrous experience, is that he does have the capacity to change.

Augustine characterizes his frustration in terms of his mind knowing and wanting to change, and yet this very same mind failing to do what it was commanding itself to do. He states:

The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed. The mind commands itself and meets resistance....The mind orders the mind to will. The recipient of the order is itself, yet it does not perform it. What causes this monstrosity and why does this happen? Mind...would not give the command *if it did not will*, yet it does not perform what it commands. The willing is not wholehearted, so the command is not wholehearted. The strength of the command lies in the strength of the will, and the degree to which the command is not performed lies in the degree to which the will is not engaged.<sup>58</sup>

Augustine is extremely perplexed because, though his body so easily obeys the commands of the mind, mind somehow can't obey what it commands of itself. Herein lies Augustine's monstrosity: he genuinely wills to live a morally upright life, for his mind would not command itself to do this *if it did not already will it*. However, he also thinks that willing the act is the "one necessary condition" for doing the act, and yet he fails to act. So though in one sense he wills the act, in another sense, he must not.<sup>59</sup> He fails to complete the desired action at this point in his life because "the degree to which the command is not performed lies in the degree to which the will is not engaged," and his will is only partially engaged.

Augustine describes will's partial engagement in terms of two wills battling it out, in particular, an old will shaped by prior bad habits and a new will inclining toward new moral ideals and commitments.<sup>60</sup> Augustine does not mean that there are literally two wills, but rather a single faculty that is divided. The one necessary condition for action is to will the act, but only if the willing is wholehearted and unqualified and not divided and "half-wounded."<sup>61</sup> So, the problem is that will is divided; the fact that Augustine has the capacity to overcome his divided will, but fails to exercise this capacity, is what makes his a

case of weakness rather than compulsion. Compulsion, as in cases of severe addiction, can be monstrous in its own right. It is the agony of quite literally not being in control of your behavior. The truly compelled person's will is enslaved by certain desires such that even if she judges she ought to behave otherwise, and even if she wishes in some sense to do so, her will just automatically inclines and moves toward certain goods in a way that she can no longer control. Indeed, this is why cases of severe addiction often require intervention, in which loved ones literally force the addict (in some cases through brute physical means) into rehabilitation facilities. Drug addicts often undergo physical detoxification, as well as therapy, in order to alter both their physiology and psychology and regain their capacity for self-control.

Augustine's monstrosity is not the agony of someone who is literally not capable of acting otherwise. Rather, his is the agony of someone in the midst of the struggle for moral growth and who has the capacity to change. Augustine has made some progress toward change, but he does not easily or smoothly become the person he so ardently desires to become, because his will to do so remains divided and thus weak. He states:

Inwardly I said to myself: Let it be now, let it be now. And by this phrase I was already moving towards a decision; I had almost taken it, and then I did not do so. Yet, I did not relapse into my original condition, but stood my ground very close to the point of deciding and recovered my breath. Once more I made the attempt and came only a little short of my goal; only a little short of it—yet I did not touch it or hold onto it.<sup>62</sup>

Here we see Augustine in struggle trying to secure the desired end and drawing nearer to doing so, but remaining weak and so failing time and again to achieve total success. Yet, with each failed attempt he does not fall completely back into his bad habits and old ways, which indicates that he is exercising some capacity for self-control. His capacity for self-control is strong enough to prevent him from completely relapsing, yet not strong enough to trigger and sustain a wholehearted and genuine moral change.

This is a classic case of weakness. Augustine's experience is not reckless, for Augustine has achieved certitude, and intellect is issuing a unified and single command to act. Nor is it a case of compulsion, for

Augustine is capable of resisting old desires, even though he feels their pull. The pull of old desires does not cause him to revert entirely to old patterns of behavior, in the way that they would do were his will compelled by these desires. Rather the tug of old desires makes him weak, and thus makes his struggle to act arduous and slow. Yet Augustine remains utterly bewildered by what causes this weakness, especially since intellect is wholeheartedly engaged. The impediment to action seems to be his continual love of temporal goods including the pleasures of the body. Yet, what is it that the impediment interferes with? How can we make sense of will being engaged enough to prevent Augustine from relapsing entirely into his old ways and yet not engaged enough to facilitate complete conversion so as to make him fall just short of his goal?

Here I return to my claim that Aquinas's action theory, and in particular his distinction between choice and use, enables us to unpack and understand Augustine's monstrosity. Augustine describes his weakness of will experience as one where his mind commands itself to will something, and yet, it is unable to perform the act that it commands of itself. Augustine is willing an act of will, namely, that his will should have a change in disposition away from loving and desiring the goods of the body toward loving and desiring the goods of God and Christianity. So in Aquinas's terms, the executive power that needs to execute the act is will itself. Augustine states that mind commands "that it should will, and would not give the command if it did not will."<sup>63</sup> In Aquinas's terms, we can liken mind's command that it should will to intellect's command to act, where intellect commands the executive powers to execute the act. Since will is the executive power in this case, then intellect is commanding will to will, specifically to love and desire spiritual goods. Moreover, Augustine states that the command would not be given unless the will was ready, *unless it already willed*. In Aquinas's terms, we can liken this stage of will to the stage of choice. Intellect has settled on what is to be done, namely to will these spiritual goods, and will has elected that it should be done (choice), and thus Augustine is poised or prepared to act. Will has chosen and intellect has commanded that will act; all that remains is to act, and yet Augustine fails to go through with it.

Augustine proceeds to explain that the act of will is not performed, because "the strength of the command lies in the strength of the will, and the degree to which the command is not performed lies

in the degree to which the will is not engaged."<sup>64</sup> In Aquinas's terms, we can understand will's failure by interpreting will's lack of engagement as a failure in use at the level of will. For Augustine, will does will the act of loving and desiring spiritual goods qua choice (i.e., in the first relation of will to the end-through-means). Moreover, intellect commands that this act of will be done; intellect is not divided, presenting mixed messages to will about what to will. Yet will does not obey intellect's command and execute the act, because will fails to apply the executive power, which in this case is will itself, to its operation, namely the loving and desiring of spiritual goods. In Aquinas's terms, this is a failure of use, but one that ultimately rests with will and not intellect.

For Aquinas, full engagement of will with respect to the end-through-means comes when will relates to the end by actually triggering and sustaining the execution of the act so that the end might be realized (i.e., in the second relation of will to the end-through-means). In Augustine's terms, the command is insufficient unless it is followed and will obeys the command by being fully engaged so that it executes the act. A description of Augustine's experience in terms of a failure in use captures where the breakdown occurs. Even though his will has chosen, thereby poising Augustine to act, and even though intellect has commanded the act, he continues to fall short of his goal to live a morally upright life, because his will fails to use its choices by failing to trigger and sustain the act of desiring and loving spiritual goods. Aquinas's distinction between choice and use helps explain how to make sense of Augustine's claim that he both wills and does not will conversion. Augustine's will does not yet form a wholehearted volition because it is engaged qua choice but not qua use.

An analogy between the relevant stages in human action and a horse race illuminates my application of Aquinas's conceptual distinction between choice and use to Augustine's monstrosity. Imagine the start of a horse race in which the jockeys and horses are in their starting gates poised to start the race and reach the finish line. We might liken this stage in the race to choice, where, by willing a particular means (i.e., the first relation of will to the end-through-means), the agent becomes prepared to act. She is in the starting gate ready to execute the act and attain the end. Yet in order for the race to start, the starter must open the gates and ring the bell as a kind of

command to begin racing. We might liken this opening of the gate, which orders the start of the race, to intellect's command to act. Yet even though the horses are prepared to race (choice), and even after the gate is opened (intellect's command), the horses cannot begin to race and cannot, therefore, begin to go for the goal until their respective jockeys trigger them into motion through spur or whip. Moreover, once the horses are set into the motion of racing around the track, in order for them to continue this motion and succeed at reaching the finish line, the jockeys must sustain the horses' running by continuing to spur and whip them. If a jockey were to stop doing these things right after the horse left the starting gate, or sometime during the middle of the race, the horse will slow down or stop altogether, and will likely fail to reach the finish line.

Just as jockeys must trigger their horses into motion and then continue to guide and encourage their horses until the finish line is reached, in order for Augustine to achieve the moral change he now so ardently desires, will must use its choices by triggering and sustaining itself to love spiritual goods. In choice, Augustine is poised in a kind of anticipatory stance to pursue the end, and intellect commands the act: will is in the starting gate and intellect has opened them up. Yet unless will uses the executive power, which in this case is will itself, by propelling it into motion and then sustaining its motion throughout the execution of the act, then Augustine will not realize the desired end. We can explain Augustine's monstrosity, and our own experiences of this kind of weakness of will, as a failure in use at the level of will.

If we concede that Augustine's experience is a bona fide case of weakness of will (as opposed to recklessness), we can then use Aquinas's conceptual distinction between choice and use to explain this kind of moral weakness. Applied in the alternative way I suggest, the distinction between choice and use helps explain the kind of moral weakness where an agent does not make an error in judgment, and really does seem to make bona fide choices about how to act, and yet fails to go through with it when the moment for action arises. Cases of moral weakness in which intellect is fully engaged, and in which an agent makes a genuine choice to act but then fails in the moment to go through with it, are cases in which will is engaged qua choice but not qua use. Aquinas posits use because he recognizes the gap between being poised to go after an end, and pursuing and possessing that end. In use, will functions as a kind of bridge that links our

choices with our behavior. I turn now in the final section of the paper to bolster support for using Aquinas's schema in this alternative way by linking his insights to recent developments in contemporary moral approaches.

## **V. Conclusion**

Though choice is often thought of as a most distinctive and central feature of human agency, in my view, it is the use of one's choices that is at the heart of human conduct. It is in use that we make our mark on the world and that our choices become real and relevant in a way that they are not when they remain mere choices without action. As Augustine's experience indicates, there is a need for use in order to explain how human acts come together and how they can fail in cases of weakness of will. Use is central because it is the volitional component that translates our choices into behavior; it creates the bridge between our decisions and the causally efficacious impact we have on the world and for which we can be held responsible.

Moral growth takes time and requires that we translate our decisions into behavior. In some cases people may have mere fleeting wishes to be morally good. They may recognize certain principles and ideals as good, and wish to have them, but not yet will to live up to them in a way that prompts serious reflection about what sorts of life choices they must make in order to do so. This lack of moral seriousness often results in, at best, hypocrisy, whereby people feign to be what they are not, or at worst, in a moral indifference expressed in the sentiment that "behaving morally is nice, but hard, and so I'm not really interested." Yet, like Augustine, many people take morality seriously. They form intentions to live up to their moral principles and go so far as to make choices about precisely how to do so. However, when the decisions and the requisite behavior are novel, requiring that we break old habits or extend moral commitments in new directions, the translation of those choices into action is difficult, and we are likely to fail a lot before we begin to get it right. The attempt to use our choices by translating our choices into behavior is where the real struggle often lies, and where moral weakness is often revealed.<sup>65</sup>

Recent developments in the psychology of human action reveal, however, that this kind of moral weakness, these failures in use at the level of will, may be a normal part of human experience. Psychologist

Chris Argyris of the Harvard Business school has studied this phenomenon in professional organizations, noting that people often espouse views about how to treat others in a professional setting, decide they will do so upon entering a meeting or professional interaction, but then fail to act accordingly.<sup>66</sup> According to Argyris, people have mental maps with regard to how to act in certain situations that are constructed in large part based on what they learn in early childhood and from cultural mores regarding appropriate moral and social behavior. Argyris became famous for arguing that the apparent split between principle and practice really involves two competing theories of action, what he calls the espoused theory and the theory-in-use. An espoused theory, as the name suggests, refers to principles of action an agent claims to endorse. Theories-in-use refers to those underlying principles of action that are often reflected in an agent's behavior. A theory-in-use is the cumulative effect of those mental maps we develop early on. Because they often have the weight of habit and familiarity, theories-in-use tend to shape an agent's behavior more so than whatever ideals or principles she may espouse, however sincerely she may hold them. That is, even once people have chosen a particular course of action based on their espoused theories, there are internal psychological constraints that can, and often do, inhibit translating those choices into behavior. However, when made aware of the gap, and with a fair amount of reflection and work, people can overcome the split and create new mental maps to direct their behavior in ways more consistent with their ideals.

In answer, then, to Augustine's initial question with which we began, "What causes this monstrosity and why does this happen?" The monstrosity of moral weakness may well be just a normal part of how the human psyche operates. Perhaps the real monstrosity lies not in the experience of moral weakness itself but rather in failing to take seriously the moral enterprise and allowing oneself to think that because living up to our moral ideals is difficult, then morality is only the purview of saints and heroes. Learning to use our choices requires serious self-reflection and continual effort on the part of the agent to "try and try again," even in the face of repeated failure. Part of what is so compelling and inspiring about Augustine's account of his own struggles is his sincerity in this moral enterprise as he challenges

himself to continue to strive for moral growth, to use his choices, despite the frustration of repeated failure.

My analysis of Augustine's monstrosity departs from Aquinas's own views of the nature of will. Unlike Aquinas, I contend that weakness of will so described (i.e., as a failure of will, not intellect) is possible, and have argued that Augustine's experience provides a real life example, indeed a paradigm case of weakness. Nonetheless, when applied in the alternative way I suggest, Aquinas's fine-grained conceptual distinctions between the various operations of intellect and will required for a complete human action are extremely useful in explaining this kind of moral weakness. They enable us to make sense of Augustine's claim that even though intellect is fully engaged, will is only partially engaged, both willing and not willing the desired end. Moreover, Aquinas's notion of use is also useful in more contemporary discussions of the very common experience of struggles for moral growth, in which people make genuine choices about how to lead their lives and yet so often fail to translate those choices into behavior.<sup>67</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 133–154.
2. VIII.v.
3. VIII.viii.
4. VIII.viii.
5. VIII.ix.
6. VIII.ix.
7. VIII.viii.
8. VIII.ix.
9. As will become evident, my use of Aquinas's notion of use departs from Aquinas's own views of the nature of will. Nonetheless, when applied in the alternative way I suggest, Aquinas's fine-grained conceptual distinction between choice and use is exceedingly useful in explaining Augustine's claim that even though intellect is fully engaged, will is only partially engaged, both willing and not willing the desired end.
10. This story is a modified version of one Jeanette Kennett presents in her discussion of the distinction between recklessness, compulsion and weakness of will. See Jeanette Kennette, *Agency and Responsibility: A Common-sense Moral Psychology* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2001), 3–5.
11. *Ibid.*, 4.
12. We can imagine this is the case when an agent has relevant information that cigarettes are highly addictive and harmful to one's health and yet

decides to start smoking. She acts recklessly and is culpable for developing the bad habit that leads then to addiction. Yet, once addiction takes hold there is a sense in which she no longer acts freely, at least in the moment; she literally cannot resist the craving for another cigarette even if she judges she ought to and in some sense wishes she could.

13. Attempts to make sense of weakness of will go back to Plato and Aristotle. For more recent discussions see Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969), 93–113 and *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1980); Michael Bratman, "Practical Reasoning and Weakness of the Will," *Nous* 13 (1979): 153–171; Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 1995); and "Akratics and Addicts," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (2002): 153–168; Sarah Buss, "Weakness of Will," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): 13–44; *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, ed. Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2003).
14. See Plato, *Protagoras*, trans., Adam Beresford (New York, New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 358b7–c1 and 358c6–d4; Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" and *Essays on Actions and Events*; see also John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 52 (1978), 1–39.
15. Kennett, *Agency and Responsibility*, 154.
16. See Gary Watson, "Skepticism about Weakness of Will," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 316–339, and *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2004).
17. In addition to Kennett see also, Michael Smith, *Ethics and the A Priori* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially in this volume "Frog and toad Lose Control," co-authored with Kennett, 73–83.
18. Kennett, *Agency and Responsibility*, 4.
19. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica (ST)*, in *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vols. I and II, ed., Anton C. Pegis (New York, New York: Random House, 1944). All citations from *ST I* and *ST I-II* come from this edition.
20. See *ST I* 82. 4. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputate de Malo (QDM)* q. 6, in *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans., Timothy McDermott (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 171–183. All citations from *QDM* come from this edition.
21. *ST I* 82.1; *ST I-II* 10.1.
22. *ST I* 82.4.

23. *ST I* 82.4c.
24. *ST I-II* 9.1c.
25. Ibid.
26. *ST I* 82.4.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. *QDM* 6.
30. *ST I* 82.4c.
31. *ST I* 82.2.
32. *QDM* 6.
33. Ibid.
34. Aquinas notes at least three ways will might be attracted to one apprehension of an object rather than another: (1) intellect weighs one more heavily, (2) some chance occurrence distracts will, and (3) the passions dispose will to certain desires, such as when intense anger leads one to desire certain ends that she might not desire once her anger subsides (*QDM* 6).
35. *ST I-II* 12.1.
36. *ST I-II* 12.1ad 3.
37. *ST I-II* 14.2; 14.5.
38. *ST I-II* 13.3.
39. *ST I-II* 13.1.
40. *ST I-II* 12.4.
41. *ST I-II* 17.1.
42. *ST I-II* 16.1.
43. Ibid; *ST I-II* 17.3.
44. *ST I-II* 16.1c.
45. *ST I-II* 17.4c.
46. *ST I-II* 16.4.
47. Ibid.
48. *ST I-II* 17.5ad1.
49. Ibid.
50. Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas's account of Freedom: Intellect and Will," in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed., Brian Davies (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 280 (emphasis mine).
51. *ST I-II* 17.5ad1.
52. Admittedly, Aquinas's views on the autonomy of the will are controversial. This paper does not hinge on this issue, however, and so I do not here aim to provide a rigorous defense of Aquinas's views one way or the other. Here it seems clear that Aquinas does not allow that will can fail to use, if intellect issues a perfect command to act.
53. VIII.i.

54. VIII.ii; VIII.vii.18.
55. VIII.ix.21.
56. VIII.v.12 (emphasis mine).
57. VIII.i.
58. VIII.ix.20 (emphasis mine).
59. VIII.viii.
60. VIII.v.10.
61. VIII.viii.19.
62. VIII.xi.25.
63. VIII.ix.18.
64. Ibid.
65. I do not mean to imply that weakness of will cannot occur at other stages, in, for example, intention or choice. Rather, cases in which people are genuinely committed to some goal, even to the point of making decisions about precisely the course of action they will take in order to achieve the end, but then failing in the moment of action to go through with it, are some of the most frustrating and interesting cases of moral weakness and are best understood as failures of use at the level of will.
66. Chris Argyris, *Reasoning, Learning, and Action* (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 1982).
67. I would like to thank Robert Pasnau for helpful comments on very early drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Kevin Gibson and James South for invaluable comments on more recent drafts, and Celeste Harvey for research assistance and copy-editing. And I am extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewers at *JPR*, whose criticisms and comments helped me produce a much stronger essay.